

Here's a Story Based on a Subject of Wide Human Appeal and Containing a Horrifying Climax

The Case of Dr. Johnstone

By BURTON PETER THOM

I HAVE just read of the death of Robert Belmore Johnstone.

With one or two exceptions, all of the metropolitan dailies printed accounts of his life and work. Many of the medical journals will also doubtless contain editorial obituaries as they appear within the next few weeks.

For, as is well known, Dr. Johnstone was one of the foremost physicians in the English speaking world before he was overtaken by the horrible misfortune at the height of his career. That he was great in the science of medicine, one of the greatest of researchers and investigators, the peer of Magendie, Bernard, or Virchow is true. That he was a noble man, as we understand that word to mean a high and gracious soul, is also true. I, who knew him better perhaps than anyone else can testify to that.

But that he suddenly became insane six years ago and that he died a few days ago is not true. Dr. Johnstone was the sanest man I ever knew, and when he was declared insane *he was already dead.*

To the reader and to those who knew him this statement is both a paradox and a mystery. Yet nevertheless it is true. The solution to this paradox and mystery I alone know. The time has now come, I believe, when it should be told. The facts as they occurred I shall set down here in the form of a story because I believe they will find more credence than if they were embodied in a monograph and read before a medical society or a society for psychological research.

It is difficult to begin, however, because I have no experience in writing fiction, which is the mode whereby this narrative is told. Also, for that reason, I am obliged to divest the telling of all scientific terms which appeals to me very much like writing about some disease in the form of a novel.

THE fame of the physician is not wide; nor does it last. Who remembers the famous physicians of a hundred years ago—Laennee, Cooper, Abernethy, Rush? Except to their profes-

sional brethren, and not all of them, they have been long forgotten.

So it is with Johnstone. Thousands remember him now because of personal contact; but many thousands never heard of him, and fifty years hence his name and his achievements in solving some of the abstruse problems of pathology, his researches in physiology, will, except to the learned few, mean almost less than nothing.

Yet, during the years of his activity, he did much work that will last. But of his greatest victory that ended in—no, I will not say defeat, for defeat means failure and he did not fail—I will tell so that if in the future, that which he proved, is proved again, the credit of it—the glory of it—will go to him.

It was while I was an interne at the Neurological Hospital that I became acquainted with Dr. Johnstone. He was chief of the visiting staff and he had a room fitted up as a laboratory where he did his experimental and research work. Because of his position at the hospital the internes were told off from time to time to assist him. Since my tendencies were, and still are I may say, all directed toward the experimental and research side of medicine rather than the practical or clinical side, I perhaps showed more enthusiasm than the other interne assistants and this common bond of interest soon made us very good friends.

When my internship at the hospital expired and I started out to practice for myself I continued to act as his assistant. It was through his influence that a year later I gave up private practice altogether and devoted myself exclusively to research, when I was appointed a research fellow in pathology at the Stone-man Institute, a whole time appointment which I still hold.

My duties there made it impossible for me to work with him as I had formerly, but while I was now doing research independently, I never failed to take the opportunity to work with my teacher (for so I regarded him) whenever the chance came. His vast knowledge and keen insight into the vagaries of disease

and the wealth of suggestions that he was always ready to give freely, made association with him of immense value to me in my own investigations. You can therefore readily understand my regard for him, not only as a scientist but as a man.

Unlike many men of high scientific attainments, whose lives are spent in the pursuit of knowledge, Dr. Johnstone was not a pedant. Nor was he a stark materialist as many of his calling often are. It seemed to me that his mind was so fine and subtle, so penetrative that he could see with the eyes of the spirit things which were denied to those who boasted of their materialism. For I have often noted that those who are steeped in science to the exclusion of all else not infrequently miss the true cause of things.

It could be truly said that Dr. Johnstone was the most eminent physiologist of his time; for none had delved more deeply into the mechanism of life; yet, unlike some that I can name, he did not believe that the life of an individual—man or beast—was simply the sum of his endocrine reactions. To him life was infinitely more than a chemical reaction. He believed that every living creature had a soul, a spirit, a *pneuma* as the old Greeks called it, that motivated its physical structure and was as much a part of it as the tissue planes of which its body was composed.

I am aware, and doubtless Dr. Johnstone was also aware, that the Theosophists and other more ancient cults hold to this belief, but I do not wish to infer that Dr. Johnstone was a mystic or given over to occultism as many who believe as he did are very prone to be. He saw it only through the cold light of reason. For when reason illuminates the spirit as well as the intellect it shows many things which others cannot see.

Researchers in medicine rarely discuss these things. Some deny with vehemence that the soul exists; to others—and they are the majority—it is a matter of indifference. But Johnstone was not of this number. The subject inter-

ested him. I am quite confident that it had interested him for many years. Personally, I must confess, the existence or non-existence of the soul in man never appealed to me as a subject for scientific discussion or research.

As to animals having souls; it never entered my mind. I recall our first conversation on the subject—these words especially:

"Those who do not believe the soul exists are not in a position to explain the phenomena of life. *'Je pense donc Je suis'*—I think, therefore I am." The Frenchman was right. I am what I am, no matter in what corporate or incorporate existence my ego may be. The spirit is as indestructible as energy."

It was shortly after this that I believe he began his strange experiments; although he did not take me into his confidence in these. I cannot, therefore, state anything as to their nature, although I am quite sure that they were not along the lines usually taken by psychic researchers. From my knowledge of his way of thinking, I am confident that his approach was from the physiologic or biologic point of view.

It was about the middle of June, or thereabouts, in 1916 that he called me on the telephone and asked me to spend the week-end at his country home on the North Shore.

"I want you to help me in an experiment that will open your eyes," was the reason he gave for the invitation.

It is needless to state that I accepted with alacrity. I was "fed up" with work, and a three days rest at his delightful home on the Sound was very appealing to me. As those who knew him are aware, Dr. Johnstone had no office in the city. His private practice was entirely as a consultant, and such cases as were referred to him by other physicians he saw in a room set aside for that purpose at the hospital. Not infrequently he was called in consultation out of the city. From June to October he spent his week-ends at his country home.

I found him waiting for me at the station, and as we went spinning along the pleasant country road in his high-powered roadster, which he had just purchased, our conversation was on the merits of his new car rather than on physiologic experiments. It was not until after an excellent dinner and we had lit our pipes on the porch that he told me of the nature of the experiment he intended to perform.

"As you perhaps know," he began, "I have been engaged for some time in research to prove the existence of the soul or personal identity. You are the only one who is acquainted with my efforts

in that direction. It is needless for me to say, as you very well know, that if I had made my experiments public, my scientific friends, with hardly an exception, would have made of me a laughing stock.

"For that reason, except to you, who I know do not doubt my sanity, I have kept my work a secret. Hitherto, as in all research having to do with life and its functions, in health or disease, I have experimented with animals. I have now reached that stage where a human subject is necessary. I therefore propose to experiment on myself, or, rather, it is necessary for myself to form part of the experiment. That is why I have sent for you. Not only that you, who in a sense I look upon as my pupil, may witness the physical demonstration of the existence of the ego outside of its original habitat, but also because I will require your assistance in what I propose to prove. It will mean that you will also participate in the fame which the proof will bring."

The technicalities of his proposed experiment he did not reveal; and as he did not seem to care to discuss them I turned the subject. The fact of the matter was that neither of us cared to talk "shop," and as the coming experiment was certainly included in that category we talked of other things.

I have often thought of that evening since. How little did either of us realize what was going to happen.

"Sleep as late as you please," were the parting words of my host before we went to bed.

If I were writing fiction it would now be in order, I suppose, to digress and tell how I was filled with vague fears of the morrow; how strange, weird noises or other happenings were heard or seen in the watches of the night, that would help to build the structure of the culminating horror. But nothing like that occurred.

There was no reason for it. A wonderful, far-reaching, perhaps out of the ordinary, scientific experiment was to be performed. Such are being done every day. To the scientist they are no more than a part of the day's work. The scientific demonstration of the soul or personal identity by means of a carefully reasoned and rationally worked out experiment, while fraught with intense interest, need not necessarily be uncanny. The investigations of Lodge, of Crookes, of Rochas, and—most recent of all—Richet, when subjected to scientific analysis are not ghostly or uncanny.

Science has no place for phenomena that reason cannot fathom. Such do not exist except in the imagination of those

who feel, but do not think. But I have often thought of why Dr. Johnstone's great experiment had the outcome that it did. I can hardly bring myself to believe that the most important part of all should have been overlooked or provided against. For I never knew whether this was an oversight or just plain accident.

Perhaps they are right who say that there are some things which we cannot or rather, ought not to know, and that there is some Power, call it what you will, that says, "So far shalt thou go and no farther."

I do not know. In a way, the experiment failed; failed horribly; yet, Dr. Johnstone proved that the soul exists, that there is spirit as well as matter, proved it in a way that I, at least, could not possibly deny. Therefore, instead of saying that he failed, I shall say that he perished, for a man may perish and yet not fail.

I was awakened in the morning by the birds chirping in the trees. After breakfast, which, I remember, was a very cheerful meal, we went out on the porch and had a smoke.

"I think we had better go upstairs now," said Johnstone, when we had finished our pipes. "I want to be through by twelve, so that I can beat you on the links this afternoon."

"We'll see about that," I replied, laughing.

The laboratory was on the top floor and ran the whole length of the house. I had never been in it before, but I could see at a glance that it was very completely equipped. In the center of the room were two glass operating tables, and on one of them, covered by a sheet was what appeared to be a human form, either of a child or a rather short man or woman. The rhythmic rise and fall of the sheet showed that it was alive.

I raised the sheet and saw a full grown orang asleep, evidently under the influence of some narcotic.

"He's one part of the experiment," said Johnstone smiling, "and I'm the other."

I did not reply, and I did not return the smile. For some reason, I do not know why, I experienced a feeling of revulsion. To experiment with animals is to me very commonplace; so too, within certain limits, are experiments on human beings. I am not squeamish and I am not sentimental, but this—

"Do you intend to transfer your intelligence into the body of this ape and have his—whatever it is—pass into yours?" I asked.

"That is just what I intend to do," he replied. "If I can do that by physical means I will have proved not only that

the soul exists, but that it exists also as a tangible entity."

I said no more; for, after all, why should I? The experiment was eminently proper. The phenomena of telepathy, apparitions of the living and dead, messages from discarnate intelligences are being constantly investigated; why should not a scientist of the first class investigate this profound and vital problem, the enigma of enigmas, from the standpoint of those sciences which have most to do with the manifestations of life and death—biology and physiology?

An investigation carried to a successful issue along these lines would do more to convince the skeptical than any amount of the so called "evidence" offered by spiritualistic investigators.

We proceeded at once with the work in hand. At Dr. Johnstone's direction, I shaved the nape of the animal's neck and also a tonsure-shaped area on the top of the head. I then adjusted a cap-shaped electrode that was held in place by tapes tied firmly under the chin. It was not necessary to shave the man, as he was sufficiently bald to allow a similar electrode to be fitted without the hair interfering with the contact.

He then had me fasten his legs and arms with leather straps attached to the table on which he lay; the beast was not restrained. I then connected the two electrodes by means of a non-insulated wire of some metallic substance having a peculiar luminous lustre—radio active I would say—and very cold to the touch.

I also attached to the posts of the battery two longer wires of the same material, one each from the two electrodes, thus completing the circuit. The battery, if I may call it such, for I do not know whether it generated electricity or some other force, I cannot describe, because the units of which it was composed were encased in a wooden box. It was placed on a small stand between the two glass-topped tables on which the man and beast reclined.

"All set!" I exclaimed.

"Turn on the switch."

I did so. There was a slight crackling noise, not unlike that made by a D'Arsonval current, and instantly both bodies became rigid. The respiratory movements ceased, as well as the apex beat of the heart. The eyes remained open and stony and staring, with the pupils widely dilated. On the face of the man and on that of the beast there seemed to come the change of death. Their features became pinched and sank in, the lips livid and drawn tight over the teeth. Theirs was the *facies Hippocratica*, the sure harbinger of death, de-

scribed by the great father of medicine long ago.

It was as if the vital organs—the heart and lungs—no longer functioned and the glow of life was gone. This phase lasted exactly one minute and twenty-two seconds, for I timed it with my watch. Then the heart of each began to beat again: slowly and feebly at first, but the force and number of the beats increased with each passing second.

They began to breathe. They lived; although unconscious. For awhile they seemed to sleep; to sleep with that profoundness that is observed only in children or the aged, or in those who are utterly exhausted by physical exertion. This second phase lasted for a few seconds less than five minutes.

Then came another change. A change that was subtle and terrible to see. It was as if life was coming back, but in each it was a different life and this difference was indelibly stamped upon their features. The countenance of the ape shone with a light that was new and strange; the countenance of the man was transformed by a look that was not human. I was awed; for what I saw was stranger far than anything I had ever beheld.

The ape turned his eyes toward me. The cavernous mouth opened, the black snout grimaced, in husky, guttural tones came the words, "Where am I?"

I did not answer; I simply stared at him. The beast sat up and stretched his arms, and then clambered to the floor and shambled toward me. I stepped back—I could not help it.

"Don't be afraid. It's only I—Johnstone." The wrinkled face broke into a hideous smile. "Help me to unloose the other."

The man by this time was tugging at the straps in an endeavor to get free. As I unbuttoned the strap that held his shoulders down, he tried to bite me.

"Stop that!" croaked the ape, and he struck the man a sharp blow in the face. He cowered from the blow and made an angry grimace, and when the leg straps were unloosed sprang to the floor with a wild yell and began capering about the room with body bent and hanging arms—like an ape. If it were not horrible, it would have seemed grotesque, but as it was it sickened me.

The beast clutched me by the arm, and in a voice that trembled with emotion, hoarse and raucous though it was, said, "See his soul is in my body and my soul is in his body. I have proved that the soul exists—that there is an ego in all living things."

IN SILENCE we stood and watched the bestial thing, and it came home to me how much the body reflects the soul within. Round and round the room it ran; peering, muttering, fingering, smelling. Suddenly it approached and stopped at the table where the battery stood.

With a cry of alarm, the one at my side leaped forward to drive it away. But it was too late. As the beast leaped, the man swept the apparatus to the floor. It fell with a crash. From the broken jars a fuming, greenish vapor arose that filled the room with a pungent, acrid odor. The wires gave off faint, red lights and turned to white, ashlike streaks.

The ape gripped him. The man yelled and bit and struggled. The body of Johnstone was that of a powerful man in the prime of life and he put up a fierce fight. Over and over they rolled, upsetting chairs and tables, now the man, now the beast, on top. Slowly but surely, the animal strength overcame that of the human. The man was down and the beast was on top.

In vain the man's fists beat the broad, black face and tore at the hairy chest. The short, thick fingers clutched his throat tighter and tighter, his face turned blue and his tongue stuck out of a sickening length, and his eyes seemed as if they were bursting from their sockets.

I watched the fearful struggle without attempting to interfere, because it was impossible to do so. It was not like a fight between man and man but a fight between two beasts. I was fascinated by it, but when I realized that the man was dying—that the beast was choking him to death, I came to myself.

"Stop it! for God's sake stop it!" I cried. "You're killing him—you're killing yourself!" and I grasped the ape by the shoulder and tried to pull him off.

"Let go of him!" He understood and relaxed his hold and stood up. The man still breathed feebly.

"What is the matter with you?" I asked with heat. "If you kill him, how can you return to your own body?"

The ape turned and looked at me.

"Yes," he groaned, "I know; but he has broken the bridge over which we must pass to enter into our own."

"What!" I cried. "Do you mean to tell me that you can't go back? Can't the apparatus be repaired? We can keep this," and I pointed to the prostrate form on the floor, "locked up until I can get what you need."

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THE CASE OF DR. JOHN- STONE

(Continued from page 25)

"It can't be done," he whispered. "Neither the apparatus or the elements of which it is composed can be replaced. I'll not go into details, but it can't be done."

I groaned.

Then we talked a while. The conversation I shall not record. It was purely personal and had to do with matters that he wished me to attend to. Finally he said:

"Thanks, old man, and good-by!" and he extended a hairy paw. "I am going now to solve another riddle," and he stole out of the fateful room, leaving me alone with his body and—the ape.

THE next day, in several New York papers, the following news item appeared.

"Monkey Scares Automobilists

"While R. J. Farley was riding with Mrs. Farley and Mr. and Mrs. B. M. Greene on the North Shore road yesterday, they almost ran over a large monkey or ape that suddenly appeared in front of their car. Mr. Farley states that the animal acted as if it wanted to be run over. Mr. Farley stopped his car just in time, and the animal ran off. It was probably the same monkey that was later found drowned in the lake on the estate of G. L. Hirt, a Wall street broker."

Several days after this item appeared two eminent alienists committed Dr. Robert Belmore Johnstone to an asylum for the insane. Both of these gentlemen knew him, and after they had signed the commitment papers, one of them, a large gentleman who always spoke in a large way, remarked to me, "A very peculiar case, Doctor!—a very peculiar case. I really cannot understand it. Even if the psychosis has been of sudden development, it is most bizarre and entirely different from any that I have ever seen. It would seem as if the man's brain had been changed into that of a beast—a simian, I would say."

I held my peace. He never knew how close to the truth he came.

Now, when I hear, as I heard only the other day, that the soul, the individuality, is nothing more than the sum of the reactions of the ductless glands—that the ego can be resolved into a chemical formula, I turn away; for I know *differently*.

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